

Preaching in the Face of Poverty

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to reflect on Luke 16:19-24, using that text as the starting point for a discussion about preaching in the African American church's context. It also examines how African American preaching can and should speak to the growing issue of poverty and income inequality in the United States in general, but more precisely within the African American community in particular. Ultimately, this paper suggests some specific ways that sermons can challenge both adherents to the Christian faith and leaders in various arenas of civil society to respond to this growing problem of poverty and income inequality.*

For purposes of clarity, people are considered to be living in poverty in the United States when individual income is at or below the annual federal poverty guideline of \$12,000, or \$23,540¹ for a family of four. However, poverty can also be understood by considering three separate but inter-related headings. First, there is poverty that is experienced by the working poor, which involves people who have part-time employment or even multiple jobs, but do not earn enough income to earn their way out of poverty. The working poor still need government assistance, but part of their dilemma is if they earn even one dollar more than the federal guidelines that define poverty, they lose all of the federal benefits such as child-care subsidies and food stamps otherwise known as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). Thus, a built-in disadvantage exists for people who earn more than the federal guidelines allow but less than accepted standards of self-sufficiency.

The second issue involving poverty is extreme poverty, which includes persons who are subsisting on a daily income of \$1.90.² According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, 1.65 million American households are living in extreme poverty, and these households include 3.5 million children.³ In truth, white-non-Hispanics households head 61.2% of all families living in extreme poverty. However, 46% of all African American families living below the Federal Poverty Level are actually living in extreme poverty.⁴ According to a recently released report on poverty in the United States, my hometown of Rochester, New York finds that Rochester suffers with the highest rate of childhood poverty of all comparably sized cities (250,000) in the country with a rate of 50.1%. It also has the second-highest rate of poverty among individuals and families in the country with some neighborhoods that have 60% of the population living below the poverty level.⁵

¹ Tom DeMichele, "Federal Poverty Level Guidelines," Spokane, WA: *Media Solutions*, 2015, accessed February 1, 2016, <http://obamacarefacts.com/federal-poverty-level/>.

² Rene Heeskens, "Global Basic Income," Gelderland, Netherlands: *GBI Foundation*, 2015, accessed February 1, 2016, <http://globalincome.org/English/Facts.html>.

³ "Extreme Poverty on the Rise in the United States," Washington, DC: *National Low Income Housing Coalition*, 2013, accessed February 1, 2016, <http://nlihc.org/article/extreme-poverty-rise-united-states>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Progress Report: A Roadmap for Change," Rochester, NY: *United Way of Greater Rochester*, 2015, accessed February 1, 2016, <https://www.uwrochester.org/UnitedWayOfRochester/media/Our-Work-Results/Documents/RMAPIProgressReportOctober2015.pdf>, 7.

The third issue involves concentrated poverty. This dilemma points to housing policies, and to the refusal of certain towns and neighborhoods to allow for the construction of low-income housing within their communities. Often referred to as NIMBY or “not in my backyard,” this is the notion that there should be housing that is made available for low-income persons and families, but many persons do not want such housing to be constructed anywhere near where they live themselves. These factors cloister together people in poverty in densely populated, demographically similar neighborhoods. Those neighborhoods are islands of despair cut off from quality public education, health care facilities, public transit connections for work and/or shopping, restaurants and places of entertainment with the exception of fast food outlets and an abundance of liquor stores. Living in poverty is hard enough, but being ghettoized in places that offer few if any visible opportunities or paths to escape that poverty or any role models or examples of persons who have managed to escape the grip of poverty is even worse.

In truth, the problem of income inequality and the devastating effects of poverty on the human spirit and on our society are not new in the United States. Writing in the *Federalist Papers #10* on November 22, 1787, James Madison, one of the founders of this republic wrote “The most common and durable source of factions has been the various and unequal distribution of property. Those who hold and those who are without property have ever formed distinct interests in society.”⁶ The irony in this statement from my perspective as a member of the African American community is that my ancestors were part of neither faction (those who own property and those who do not). Our ancestors were listed as among the property that generated wealth for others. The United States Constitution, Article 1, section 1, clause 3 makes that fact explicit, stating that:

Representatives and direct taxes shall be apportioned among the several states which may be included within this union, according to their respective numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole number of free persons, including those bound to service for a term of years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other persons.⁷

While the so-called 3/5ths clause is no longer employed, the problem of wealth disparity and income inequality in the United States continues to be a matter of great concern. The U.S. Constitution enshrined the legacy of slavery. The offshoots of slavery, which were sharecropping, legalized segregation, the denial of voting rights, and the relentless exposure to terrorist attacks from the KKK and other white supremacist groups and individuals, have had an incalculable impact on the persistent levels of poverty that impacts African American communities to this day. In his book, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, Aldon Morris describes “the tri-partite system of oppression” that locked African Americans into the margins of American society.⁸

The first part of that tri-partite system is maintaining people in abject poverty with no chance of escape through education, promotion, or the establishment of one’s own business. The

⁶ James Madison, “The Union as a Safeguard against Domestic Faction and Insurrection,” New York, NY: *foundingfathers.info*, 1787, accessed February 1 2016, <http://www.foundingfathers.info/federalistpapers/fed10.htm>.

⁷ “Constitution of the United States,” *The Charters of Freedom: “A New World Is at Hand”* (2016), http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_transcript.html.

⁸ Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1984), 1–2.

second part of the system involves the denial of voting rights so that no legislative solution to the problem of poverty could be pursued. The third and most brutal part of the system involved the regular use of physical intimidation and even death by the most torturous means imaginable for those in the African American community who dared to break out of their assigned and prescribed place in society.⁹

The reasons for poverty in America take many forms; the increasing concentration of wealth and political influence in the hands of fewer and fewer people certainly lead the list. To begin, the total compensation of CEOs in many U.S. corporations is over 200 times the salary paid to their workers. Some corporations pay their CEOs at a rate of 1000 times their median worker's salary.¹⁰ A recent study by the Harvard Business School revealed that it takes a typical worker at Starbucks or McDonald's more than six months to earn what each company's CEO earns in a single hour.¹¹ Those persons, and the banks and corporations they control, decide what factories are closed, what jobs are outsourced, what wages will be paid to workers, what levels of health care workers receive, and the number of days of maternity leave and sick days workers will be provided. They also decide what environmental regulations they will observe or circumvent. They decide what use or abuse of legal and illegal immigrant labor they will employ and at what wage level; usually offering wages and working conditions that lock many native born American citizens out of many sectors of the labor market.

Marian Wright Edelman, President of the Children's Defense Fund in Washington, D.C. wrote this about the facts of poverty in the United States:

[T]he United States ranks second out of 35 developed countries on the scale of what economists call "relative child poverty," with 23.1 percent of its children living in poverty. Only Romania ranked higher. It was another shameful reminder that, as economist Sheldon Danziger put it, "Among rich countries, the U.S. is exceptional. We are exceptional in our tolerance of poverty."¹²

Here is the dilemma involving poverty in the United States. You have an unconscionable concentration of wealth in the hands of a small number of persons relative to the national population. You have "exceptional tolerance" for poverty even as it impacts the lives of children across the country. Add to these factors the role of America's original sin, which is racism, and the problems of poverty, extreme poverty, and concentrated poverty in the African American community comes more clearly into focus. Under related conditions elsewhere in the world, Gustavo Gutierrez, the Peruvian liberation theologian, offers true and compelling insight:

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Jenny Che, "Here's How Outrageous the Pay Gap between CEOs and Workers Is," New York, NY: *The Huffington Post*, 2015, accessed February 1, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/ceo-worker-pay-gap_us_55ddc3c7e4b0a40aa3acd1c9.

¹¹ Ferdman, Robert A. "The Pay Gap between CEOs and Workers Is Much Worse Than You Realize," Washington, DC: *The Washington Post*, 2014, accessed February 1, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/09/25/the-pay-gap-between-ceos-and-workers-is-much-worse-than-you-realize/>.

¹² Edelman, Marian Wright. "Tolerance of Poverty," Washington, DC: *Children's Defense Fund*, 2012, accessed February 1, 2016, <http://www.childrensdefense.org/newsroom/child-watch-columns/child-watch-documents/tolerance-of-poverty.html>.

“Christians cannot forgo their responsibility to say a prophetic word about unjust economic conditions.”¹³

What has been stated above sets forth the problem of poverty in the United States. The looming questions become: Why is it important that preachers take the time to educate themselves about these issues and statistics? Why is it important for preachers to focus some of their sermons and their church programming, including their church budget, to address and respond to the issue of poverty? Gutierrez makes clear the importance of this work for preachers when he states:

All theological inquiry is contextual. Our context today is characterized by a glaring disparity between the rich and the poor. No serious Christian can quietly ignore this situation. It is no longer possible for someone to say “Well, I didn’t know” about the suffering of the poor. Poverty has a visibility today that it did not have in the past. The faces of the poor must now be confronted.

Gutierrez continues:

An active concern for the poor is not only an obligation for those who feel a political vocation; all Christians must take the Gospel message of justice and equality seriously. Christians cannot forgo their responsibility to say a prophetic word about unjust economic conditions. Poverty poses a major challenge to every Christian conscience and therefore to theology.¹⁴

The questions that arise for the preacher are, “How do I identify an angle or perspective from which this problem of poverty and its effects upon people can be addressed within the context of a Sunday morning sermon?” “What biblical texts offer a legitimate and insightful focus on the question of poverty that can be used by preachers as they consider the sermons they might want to preach on this subject?” In particular, this paper weighs the biblical text, Luke 16:19-24. This pericope clearly extends beyond verse 22 and the ultimate focus of the text touches upon more than simply the issue of poverty. Nevertheless, this text is unique among biblical passages for the way in which wealth disparity and the problem of being so called “exceptional” in the tolerance of poverty sit side-by-side.

The relevant part of the text for purposes of this paper reads as follows in the NRSV:

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.

¹³ Daniel Hartnett, “Remembering the Poor: An Interview with Gustavo Gutierrez,” New York, NY: *America Press, Inc.*, 2003, accessed February 1, 2016, <http://americamagazine.org/issue/420/article/remembering-poor-interview-gustavo-gutierrez>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

He called out, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames.”

The text begins with a description of a person’s wealth and prosperity. This person is simply described as “the rich man.” The first indicator of his wealth is his attire; he is dressed in purple and fine linen. Only those who could afford the cost of the dyes required to produce that color in a garment wore the color purple. One thinks about the woman named Lydia from the city of Thyatira in Acts 16:14-15 who was able to provide hospitality to Paul largely on the basis of the wealth she had generated as someone who was a “dealer in purple cloth.” In addition to the outer garment made of purple, the story indicates an additional layer of clothing made of fine linen. More than simple cotton, fine linen is a higher level of quality and cost. In a world where people were largely confined to wearing clothing made of homespun cloth with no added colors included, this man’s attire was an easy indicator of his wealth and the conspicuous consumption he could easily afford.

The second indicator of his wealth was his lifestyle; “he feasted sumptuously every day.” This phrase points to more than his daily diet. The NIV (New International Version) translates the phrase to say, “He lived in luxury every day.” That speaks to his entire lifestyle; the appointments in his home and the resources he possessed to acquire anything he desired that might make his life more comfortable. This was not a man who squirreled away his money for a once-in-a-lifetime vacation. This was a man who spent every day living at a level of opulence that most people will never be able to enjoy. “He lived in luxury and ate sumptuously every day.” He was not worried about saving money for a rainy day; he had disposable income well beyond his three-to-six months of emergency funds.

The third indicator of his wealth is introduced at the same time the poor man named Lazarus enters the story, “At his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus.” The text does not say “at his door.” The text says “at his gate.” Before you could get to his front door you had to enter through the gate that would then allow access to his door. He lived off of the sidewalk or the thoroughfare. One thinks about the scene in the film *Ben Hur* where a rich man lived in a lavish house that could only be approached when you came through the front gate and then passed through the garden that led to the front door. This man was not a common man of the people living at the same level as everyone else in town. This was a rich man, dressed in purple and fine linen, and lived in luxury every day, and whose home could only be accessed when you got past his front gate.

The text then shifts from the rich man, often referred to by the Latin word *Dives*, to the poor man named Lazarus. There are several indicators attached to the description of Lazarus that allow for a sharp contrast between the man inside the house and the man lying outside the gate. The first indicator of his impoverished condition is that every day someone came and laid Lazarus outside the gate of the rich man. Lazarus did not walk there; probably because he was crippled or perhaps even paralyzed. Lazarus was not described as standing or even sitting outside the gate; he was described as being laid there by others. The author not only describes Lazarus by his physical disabilities, but also describes him by his economic condition; he was a beggar. This description linked him in many ways to the paralyzed beggar who sought money from Peter and John in Acts 3:1-6. Rather than living in luxury every day, these paralyzed beggars lived only by the charity, mercy, and compassion of those who passed by them. In short, beggars sat in the place where they were laid each day. The sole hope of the paralyzed beggars was that those

who passed by them would notice them, and that those who noticed them would respond to their desperate condition.

The effects of a physical disease that complicated his life further describe Lazarus' condition. He was covered in sores! This was likely not a matter of leprosy, because such an affliction in the first-century AD in Palestine would have prevented him from being carried through the streets by others to the gate of a prominent community member. Often leprosy results in isolation or in the humiliating practice of hearing and stating the word "unclean." Like Job before him, Lazarus probably suffered with boils that covered his body from "the soles of his feet to the crown of his head" (Job 2:7).

That miserable physical condition was made even more humiliating by the fact that dogs came and licked the open sores on his body. This detail points to two separate but important indicators. First, Lazarus did not have the strength or the mobility to prevent the dogs from licking the open sores on his body. More important, however, is the type of dogs licking those open sores. There are two words for dogs in the Greek New Testament. One word is *kunarium*, which refers to little dogs or puppies that were sometimes allowed to eat crumbs from the table. The other word is *kuon*, which means full-grown dogs that were no longer allowed in the home or welcomed by homeowners. The word for dogs used in Luke 16:21 is *kuon*. People in first-century Palestine did not keep these full-grown dogs as house pets as is so commonly done in the US in the twenty-first century. *Kuon* dogs were scavengers that ate out of garbage heaps and piles of trash.¹⁵ They were not subject to any vaccinations that would rid them of any infections like rabies. Instead, these dogs that had been eating from the garbage piles of the city, carrying with them unimaginable germs and bacteria, were left to freely lick the open sores on the body of Lazarus.

Here is the contrast that Jesus communicates in this passage. Great wealth on the one hand, and great poverty and sickness on the other hand co-existing side-by-side, day after day, year after year. The rich man ate sumptuously and lived in luxury every day. Every day the poor man was laid outside his gate, covered in sores, being licked by the tongues of scavenger dogs. Lazarus longed to eat the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table; crumbs that would have been offered to the *kurion* (puppies), but were never offered to Lazarus. The phrase "longed to eat" suggests that Lazarus would gladly have eaten the crumbs from the rich man's table, but the rich man never offered even the crumbs from his table to the poor beggar who was laid outside his gate. The rich man never noticed, never responded to, and never showed any interest in the condition of Lazarus even though he passed by him every day as he entered and exited through his front gate. The rich man was guilty of the sin pointed to by Gustavo Gutierrez when he said, "It is no longer possible for someone to say, 'Well, I didn't know' about the suffering of the poor."¹⁶

The text then shifts from markedly different conditions during life to their markedly different conditions after death. When Lazarus dies, he is carried by the angels to heaven where he is placed in the arms of Abraham. When the rich man dies he is buried and awakens in Hades where he is now being tormented in the flames. While the text moves to discuss other matters, it is at this point that readers must pause and ask the theological and ethical question: "Why did the rich man end up in hell?" There is something to be said about the request to have Lazarus remain in a subordinate position and bring cool water to Hades so that he could quench the rich man's

¹⁵ Miller, Madeline S. and J. Lane Miller, "Dogs," in *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, ed. Madeline S. Miller and J. Lane Miller (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), 139.

¹⁶ Hartnett.

thirst. There is also something to be said about the dialogue between Abraham and the rich man, asking that Lazarus be sent to the rich man's brothers to warn them so they do not have to face the fate that this rich man was enduring in the flames of Hades.

All of these issues follow after the initial fact that the rich man who dressed magnificently and ate sumptuously every day was now sentenced to eternal torment in Hades. Why? The answer cannot be so simple as to say that it was his wealth that prevented him from entering into heaven. Abraham himself had been a wealthy man during his earthly life, and now Lazarus was sitting in heaven in the presence of Abraham. Jesus did warn that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter into the kingdom of God (Matthew 19:24, Mark 10:25 and Luke 18:25). However, while Jesus warned that it was difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven, he did not say it was impossible. The deciding factor is not the possession of wealth, but what a rich person chose to do with that wealth.

Preachers and homileticians need to focus not simply on the evils of wealth as an end in itself, but on challenging of persons with financial resources to use their money in ways that can bless and benefit those around them. It could easily be concluded that the reason why the rich man was confined to Hades is because at no point in the text, and probably at no point in his life did he ever pay attention to the poverty, sickness, humiliation and hunger that was laid outside his front gate every day. The way in which this rich man responded to Lazarus calls to mind the story of the person who was asked, "Which is worse, ignorance or apathy?" The person's answer was, "I don't know and I don't care." Apathy is the sin of the rich man in Luke 16:19-24 that finds him in Hades; he never took the time to notice or care about the poor man just outside his front gate.

This text has much to say to and about African American preachers and the sermons delivered in African American churches. There may be a tendency to describe the entire African American community through the condition of Lazarus. I made this error during my first year in seminary in a paper that I wrote for Old Testament scholar James A. Sanders. Coming out of the experience of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and enrolling in seminary in 1970, I sought to make the case that the best way to read this text in Luke 16:19-24 was as a racial paradigm in which all of white society was embodied in the character of the rich man, and all of black society was lumped into the misery of Lazarus. Such a reading of the text served to focus all of the blame and all of the responsibility for correcting and addressing the problem of wealth disparity solely on white people. This rationale suggested that the black community was victimized, paralyzed, and reduced to waiting upon the benevolence of others.

Sanders offered a not-so-subtle rebuke to my analysis by saying that "when you come away from a biblical text feeling better about yourself, you can be reasonably sure that you have misread that text." Since the text was not approachable as a racial paradigm that exempted black people from any responsibility in addressing the issue of wealth disparity, it could only be concluded that the text was, in fact, a class paradigm in which two people of the same racial or ethnic group lived side-by-side, or at least encountered each other on a daily basis. By this reading of the text, one can and should ask the question of whether or not most black churches in the United States are more like the rich man than they are like Lazarus?

Preachers need to challenge many black churches with the prospect that many persons who are part of congregations may end up in Hades, not because their worship format is improper, or because their sanctuaries are improperly adorned, but because every Sunday they come and leave their churches without noticing or responding to the Lazarus-like conditions

existing outside their sanctuary doors. Most black churches still sit within inner-city communities, even if the members of those churches have long since moved out of those neighborhoods to safer and more prosperous communities. The question then arises, what should inner-city black congregations do about the squalor and poverty that exist in their church neighborhoods? For some the answer is to simply relocate the church outside of those communities where their membership is not troubled by the people and problems that are found on every street corner and in every alleyway. However, for those persons who for whatever reason choose to remain in their inner city locations, this passage in Luke 16:19-24 becomes a haunting problem.

With parking lots crowded with expensive luxury cars, with persons inside the church dressed in expensive designer clothing, and with substantial amounts of money being raised every Sunday to maintain the beauty and comfort-level of the church sanctuary and other gathering spaces, what should those churches be asked or expected to do about the problems of the people that are just outside their sanctuary doors? In my thirty-four years as a Senior Pastor and in my 44 years as an ordained member of the clergy who has worked with predominantly if not exclusively African American congregations, it has been a regular and consistent challenge to get those churches to take any interest in or responsibility for the surrounding community.

In his 1963 "I Have A Dream" speech, delivered at The March on Washington, Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke about America's black communities as "islands of poverty and despair surrounded by an ocean of material prosperity."¹⁷ That visual image of prosperity and poverty co-existing within close proximity to one another is reinforced by the central finding of the 1968 Kerner Commission Report that sought to identify the root causes of the urban violence that broke out in cities across the country between 1965 and 1968. That report concluded that America had become "Two nations, one black and one white, separate and unequal."¹⁸ In this country, there is no doubt that there are multiple reasons for the existence of two Americas, ranging from failing public schools, to urban violence, fragile families, mass incarceration, and discrimination in hiring and promotions, A great economic gap exists between blacks and whites. However, focusing on that fact and its causes is not the aim of this paper. What this paper seeks to address is how black churches and black preachers can stop being mere spectators of this problem as they come and go from their churches weekly. Using Luke 16:19-24 as a point of reference, this paper argues that African American churches and those who preach there must be challenged to find their proper place within this parable. On the whole, the membership rolls of most African American churches are not filled with people who fit the profile of Lazarus; sick, impoverished, hungry and humiliated. Rather, most African American churches, including every one that I have served or belonged to are characterized by the lifestyle of the rich man in the parable; well dressed, well fed, well housed and generally well employed, but largely detached from and disinterested in the conditions of people living in poverty who are just outside the church doors.

To be sure, there were persons within those congregations whose lives were closer to Lazarus than to the rich man, but they never represented the majority of those congregations, or the majority of most congregations in the African American church community. So the challenge remains for African American preachers to find ways to speak to the horrific problem of poverty

¹⁷ James M. Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 217.

¹⁸ Otto Kerner, "The Report on the National Advisory Commission of Civil Disorders." ed. United States Department of Justice: *National Institute of Justice*, 1967, 1.

as it impacts people not only around the world but also around the corner, and not only across the country but also across the street from where their churches are located. Not only that, but their sermon objectives should persuade congregations and individual members to work together to address suffering going on around them.

This is not an easy task since most people do not come to church looking for something else to do or for something else over which to worry. They come looking for personal hope and relief from problems that confront them every day. Preachers should never fail to address these concerns. Much can be learned from what Cleophus LaRue refers to as domains of concern in black preaching. In his book, *The Heart of Black Preaching* LaRue lists five domains or themes that have regularly been employed by black preachers over more than a one-hundred-year period of time. Those domains are personal piety, care of the soul, social justice, corporate concerns, and the maintenance of the institutional church.¹⁹

There are times when a sermon should focus on matters of personal spiritual formation. There are times when the souls of people need to be soothed and sustained as they pass through times of great personal trial and suffering. There are times to be specific about life of a particular ethnic group that needs to be addressed; issues such as black-on-black crime or the staggeringly high level at which black males drop out of school. There are times when a sermon needs to address the day-to-day needs of the local church; volunteers, stewardship, leadership development, as well as building and staff maintenance challenges. However, as LaRue suggests, there must be those times when the focus of a sermon turns to matters of social justice, which in this instance involves the face of—causes of—problems related to poverty.

On more than a few occasions, I have been reminded of the words of Amos who said, “Woe to those who lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall. . . but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph” (Amos 6:4 and 6). When I hear churches and pastors suggesting that the worship of God is their primary interest, with no interest being expressed or exhibited in the issues of apparent poverty and human suffering that are visible all around them, another passage from Amos also comes to mind that needs to be employed in weekly preaching: “I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. . . . Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:21-24). It is clear that the biblical prophets objected to people who preferred religious rituals over works of righteousness, and who would rather sacrifice an animal to atone for their own sins than to sacrifice some of their personal wealth to address the unmet needs of food and clothing for their neighbors.

James Henry Harris, writing in *Pastoral Theology: A Black Church Perspective*, clearly speaks to this issue when describing so many African American congregations as “introverted churches.” He says:

The church acts like an independent entity, divorced from the suffering of the external world. It is basically silent, peaceful, and harmonious – failing miserably to understand the need to abandon its neutrality on issues of social and political justice . . . basking instead in the beauty of its bricks and mortar and the melodious syncretizing of its chancel choirs, pipe organs, and grand pianos.²⁰

¹⁹ Cleophus LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 21–25.

²⁰ James Henry Harris, *Pastoral Theology: A Black Church Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 34–35.

Harris continues by saying:

This approach may contribute to numerical growth and internal excitement. However, what the church must do is “move beyond personal conversion to community transformation. The concept of community needs to be expanded to include the whole community – the church and the world. However, as long as the church is parochial and introverted in its approach to ministry, it will continue in its failure to effect liberation and change in the United States and the world.”²¹

It is absolutely essential that preachers within the African American church community challenge their congregations to see the necessity of opening their doors, their hearts and even their wallets and church budgets to address the issue of poverty and the issues of economic injustice in the United States. It is not enough to point the finger of blame at those outside of the community who may contribute to the problem of poverty; although, such advocacy and prophetic critique are always in order. It is also not enough to look elsewhere for help from government grants and funding; although, some problems and projects do require a level of financial investment that only a governmental or corporate entity can provide.

In addition to those necessary aspects of advocacy and programming, there remains a public need for Christians to demonstrate the love of God by showing love and concern for those just outside the doors of their local churches, those whom Jesus described as “the least of these” (Matthew 25:31-44). It is long past time for African American churches located in the inner-city areas of this country to stop waiting for checks from their members and start writing checks that intend to meet the human needs in their surrounding community that are difficult if not impossible to ignore. Churches, under the guidance of biblical principles, need to imagine ways by which they can offer help and hope to persons who live within the immediate neighborhood where churches are located. Failure to do so is to place black preachers and black churches in the position of the rich man in Luke 16:19-24 who failed to notice the poor man just outside his gate and who ended in Hades as a consequence of that failure. We need preaching from the pulpits of African American churches that seeks to raise these issues on a continuing basis.

This argument brings us to a question of what might be preventing African American preachers from addressing the issues of poverty in their sermons. At least one answer to that question is the fixation that many African American preachers have with what is commonly called “prosperity theology” or Word of Faith theology. This notion emerged in the 1950s in the preaching and teaching of Kenneth Hagin of Tulsa, Oklahoma, but was popularized in the African American community by Frederick Eikerenkoetter, also known as “Rev. Ike.” His only advice for dealing with poverty is captured in this phrase, “The best thing you can do for the poor is not be one of them.”²² This philosophy professes that “God’s primary focus is to bless followers with health and wealth.”²³

Over the years, an increasing number of preachers in the African American community embrace and espouse this theology. They also tend to agree with another idea from Rev. Ike,

²¹ Ibid., 35.

²² Dennis McLellan, “Rev. Ike Dies at 74; Minister Preached Gospel of Prosperity”, Los Angeles, CA: *Los Angeles Times*, 2009, accessed February 2, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-reverend-ike31-2009jul31-story.html>.

²³ Marvin McMickle, *Where Have All the Prophets Gone?* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2006), 106.

namely: “It is not the love of money that is the root of all evil. It is the lack of money.”²⁴ The clear successor to Rev. Ike in this ministry approach is Creflo Dollar, referred to in *Business Week* as “Cashflow Dollar” because of the estimated \$70 million raised by his ministry each year.²⁵ He heads a 25,000-member congregation in Atlanta, GA. In addition, Dollar leads a 5000-member church that meets regularly in New York’s Madison Square Garden. He recently announced the need for his followers to raise \$65 million so he that could purchase a new, private jet to shuttle back and forth between his two congregations.²⁶ As I argue at length in *Where Have All the Prophets Gone?*, it is increasingly harder to see or hear African American preachers functioning as prophets because too many have become intoxicated by the pursuit of “profits.”²⁷

Luke Powery refers to prosperity theology and the preaching that flows from it as “candy theology.” This term surfaced in an interview with Gardner Taylor. In 2006. Dr. Taylor spoke about the willingness of his daughter to eat candy because of its pleasant taste, even though it offered no nutritional value. Powery then points out that this fixation on prosperity theology does not flow from anything found in scripture. Instead, it is the result of “teleconditioning,” or an understanding of the Christian faith that is conditioned by what one views through television and internet broadcasts of noted prosperity preachers. The perceived prosperity of the preachers viewed on TV serves to validate their message.”²⁸ William Swift of Rice University writes that the apparent prosperity of the preacher delivering this message of wealth and health is essential to the process because “the preacher’s wealth is confirmation of what they are preaching.”²⁹ Luke Powery capsulizes the problem when he states, “there are many mega-churches that are preaching a mini-gospel at times, one that promotes a feel-good religion.”³⁰

Ultimately, the problem with prosperity theology is that too often it reflects the dichotomy of wealth and poverty living in close proximity—similar to that described in Luke 16: 19-24. What differs is the prosperity of many of the people inside the church contrasts the poverty of so many of the people who live in the neighborhoods that surround those churches. Add to this fact the obstacle of sermons that regularly focus more on the “good life” spoken of by John Locke rather than the “abundant life” spoken of by Jesus Christ, it becomes easy to see why the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is both insightful and challenging for African American preachers and to the people for whom their sermons are intended. Here is how preaching under the influence of prosperity theology so often occurs:

It is preached from the pulpit of churches that are located in neighborhoods resembling bombed-out war zones. They are infested with drugs, alcoholism, HIV/AIDS, prostitution and domestic violence. The poverty rate among school-age children approaches 65%.

²⁴ McClellan, “Rev. Ike Dies at 74; Minister Preached Gospel of Prosperity.”

²⁵ Brian Grow, “Church of the Mighty Dollar,” *Business Week Online*, May 23, 2005, accessed February 2, 2016, http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/05_21/b3934016_mz001.htm?campaign_i.

²⁶ Abby Ohlheiser, “Pastor Creflo Dollar Might Get His \$65 Million Private Jet after All,” Washington, DC: *The Washington Post*, 2015, accessed February 2, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/06/03/pastor-creflo-dollar-might-get-his-65-million-private-jet-after-all/>.

²⁷ McMickle, 99–118.

²⁸ Luke Powery, *Dem Dry Bones* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2012), 4–5.

²⁹ Carolyn Tuft and Bill Smith. “TV Evangelists Call Signals from the Same Playbook,” St. Louis, MO: *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, 2003, accessed February 2, 2016, <http://culteducation.com/group/1050-joyce-meyer/13457-tv-evangelists-call-signals-from-the-same-playbook.html>.

³⁰ Powery, 8.

More often than not there is little interaction between those black congregations and the people and/or the problems that reside just outside the doors of their church buildings.³¹

Karl Barth quotes Paul Tillich in the book *The Preaching of the Gospel*. Tillich states, “Preaching must always be done with an awareness of the present moment.”³² With that challenge in mind, African American preachers need to direct more of their attention to the issues of poverty, economic justice, and the wealth disparity just outside the door of their churches. There may be no more urgent issue confronting the African American community as a whole than this single problem. Failure to respond to this issue both from the pulpit and the pew could result in a great many church-going people dying and waking up in Hades!

³¹ McMickle, 89.

³² Karl Barth, *The Preaching of the Gospel* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1960), 54.